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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:
Pető, A. (2016). How are Anti-Gender Movements Changing Gender Studies as a Profession? *Religion & Gender*, *6*(2), 297-299. https://doi.org/10.18352/rg.10182

RELIGION & GENDER
Vol. 6, no. 2 (2016), 297-299 | DOI: 10.18352/rg.10182

How are Anti-Gender Movements Changing Gender Studies as a Profession?

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'Thank God for the Catholic Church!', Fassin quotes an imagined gender studies expert, as the anti-gender movement is gaining momentum in France. My response reflects on an issue that remains unaddressed in this volume: what are the consequences of the increasing public exposure of gender studies as a profession due to the surge of anti-gender movements?

Recently gender studies scholars can indeed not complain about the lack of wider social interest in their work – just the opposite is true. In Poland, 'gender' was chosen as the word of the year in 2013. The mailboxes of gender studies faculty members have been filled with emails with queries about their research and invitations to public debates in different media. Can the profession of academic feminism meet the expectations of what Fassin calls the 'double exposure', as anti-gender movements, demonstrations, and discourse brought not only national but also international recognition to gender studies scholars (Pető 2016)? And in what sense is this different from 'mainstreaming' gender, which has been the aim of gender studies professionals?

While attacking gender studies as an academic discipline, the anti-gender movements are gaining much support all over in Europe (Kovács 2017: 175–189). Some representatives are connected to different churches, while some are strong non-believers who draw upon an anti-gender position to criticize neoliberalism (Grzebalska 2016). These movements are not only piggybacking upon anti-feminist sentiments that continue to be popular, they are also substantially different. The public exposure of gender as an analytical concept and gender studies as scholarship has made the profession even more political as it found itself in the midst of an open political struggle that lead to a 'paradoxical recognition', as Fassin put it. Gender studies always had a strong and dialogic relationship with social activism. This new situation, however, convinced those who, in recent years, hoped to see the future of gender studies in the comfortable academic ivory tower of publishing in peer reviewed journals, that their dream turned out to be a fragile illusion.

Gender studies have been long criticized for reconstructing internal professional hierarchies with the cult of what Liz Stanley and Sue Wise called 'theory stars' (for more on this, see Pető 2001: 89–93). Paradoxically anti-gender movements are contributing to this process as they are promoting key figures of

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gender studies through attacking them: Garbagnoli mentions Simone de Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, Adrienne Rich, Monique Wittig and notably Judith Butler, considered as 'the Papesse of gender' by the Catholic Church. Fassin points out how the debate about the work of Fausto-Sterling has played a role in creating the intersex movement. Anti-gender movements are attacking certain well-known personalities, which contributes to the increasing hierarchies and inequalities in the profession. Those rank and file gender studies scholars who are spending their usually unpaid time with writing response articles or blog posts to the anti-gender arguments never reach the same public recognition as the 'theory queens' while in certain countries they even risk their employment in academia. In an increasingly shrinking academic job market, due to the continuous cuts in social sciences and humanities, gender studies have been an easy target of budget cuts driven by austerity measures.

Case in her article recalls the reason why and how in Anglo-Saxon legal language the term 'gender' is being used. It was Ruth Bader Ginsburg who 'used the term 'gender' interchangeably with 'sex' in legal documents, to ward off from the minds of judges what she feared might be the distracting association of 'sex' with what happens in porn theaters' (Case, p. 157). Fassin points out that the term gender in English sounds foreign to French ears, and thus alien to the notion of national identity as promoted by the President Sarkozy from 2007 to 2012.

As gender is an Anglo-Saxon term, in non-English speaking countries educational institutions focusing on gender equality are mostly named as 'women's studies' centers, as is the case in Italy as Garbagnoli points out. In Italy, France, and Argentina gender studies as a field is hardly institutionalized, and therefore cannot act as a counterbalance to the well-organized public attacks by the representatives of the anti-gender movement. Italian feminism may even be presented as the Catholic Church's ally against gender as Garbagnoli reminds us, if they are presenting a national and patriotic feminist version of promoting the equality of Italian women as opposed to transnational equality promoting sexual democracy.

How exactly might the profession be changed by this new vicious political campaign? Gender studies developed as an interdisciplinary critical body of knowledge with a relatively late institutionalization. A post-modern approach to the production of knowledge – politically informed, critical, and interdisciplinary – has led to new concepts. Previously marginalised actors, who represent a critical perspective, such as the gender perspective, now had to be acknowledged. This was firmly based on normative decisions, such as making clear and recognizing the positionality of the one who speaks or writes. This also resulted in the challenging of the subject-object division with the subsequent development of new symbolisms, redefinitions, and new myths. Such 'positionality' was recognized by the British historian Eric Hobsbawn as follows: 'My truth is equally valid as your truth'. This is an anti-universal approach, which anti-gender forces are now appropriating.

Yet the anti-gender campaigns have forever changed the knowledge production involved in gender studies. It is not only the case that politicians and public intellectuals without any knowledge or training in gender studies are making unquestionable public statements on professional issues such as sex education or the science curriculum. As Garbagnoli points out, bookshops now shelve books by Judith Butler and other gender studies scholars together with

anti-gender volumes as if they had the same scientific weight. This institutional and academic vulnerability of gender studies is increasing because of the re-evaluation of its position in the field of science and knowledge production as such. By now science and the production of knowledge have indeed become the main battlegrounds for 'anti-gender movements'. As Roman Kuhar convincingly argued in his analysis of the developments in Slovenia and Croatia: the anti-gender movements' use of 'scientific' evidence against 'gender ideology' means a paradigm change in science and the production of knowledge as we know it (Kuhar 2015: 84–92). Any scientific or scholarly data can now become contested based on normative moral positions.

The recent attacks changed not only the public standing of the gender studies profession as such but also, as Mario Pecheny, Daniel Jones, and Lucía Ariza in the case of Argentina point out, coalitional mobilization of LGBT and feminist movements with progressive religious actors are bridging previous cleavages thought to be theoretically unbridgeable such as the collaboration between secular and religious political forces. It is unusual that practice is much ahead of theory in the field of gender studies, but the swift and unexpected developments due to the anti-gender movements brought unexpected results in developing theory.

Gender studies are mostly hosed by the humanities and social sciences and for too long it left 'biology for the biologists' as Fassin warns us. Studying religion through a gendered lens is still marginal in the field of gender studies when educated experts are needed to be able to participate to public debates with highly trained representatives of the anti-gender movements. A situation that should change quickly if gender studies scholars receiving this recent unwanted and unsolicited attention want to thank themselves, and not God, for their social impact.

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